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CIA establishes a committee to assist defectors

By Bill Gertz
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The CIA has set up a special committee of experts from outside the agency to handle problems associated with defectors, according to CIA officials.

The Special External Resettlement Review Committee, as the panel is called, will examine cases of defectors and deal with grievances among the several hundred former intelligence officers and foreign government officials — many of whom face death threats — who receive support and protection from the CIA, said officials who asked not to be named.

The committee, which is in its early stages, is made up of several private experts, including some who have intelligence backgrounds, specifically a experience with defectors.

One White House official said the review panel was an idea of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, which investigated problems associated with handling defectors in 1987.

The official said the review panel, when fully operational, will be directed by a board of "three or four" experts. It will work with a veteran CIA operations officer who is in charge of the CIA's resettlement program.

CIA officials declined to identify the board members by name and said the names would be released at a later date.

"They have complete access to all defector cases and will make recommendations to the DCI [director of central intelligence]," one official said.

Another official said defectors with money problems probably would contact the board when seeking additional financial support.

The problem of dealing with defectors came to public attention in 1985 when senior Soviet KGB intelligence officer Vitaly Yurchenko walked away from a Georgetown restaurant after a three-month defection. A short time later he turned up at a Soviet Embassy news conference and denounced the CIA for kidnapping him.

In July, a second KGB defector,

Col. Victor Gundarev, went public with complaints of mistreatment by the CIA. He accused the CIA of tapping his telephone calls and failing to live up to a promise of permanent-resident immigration status.

Col. Gundarev stated in a letter to CIA Director William Webster that his problems had "put me on the way of redefection, or looking for any other country to live in."

The CIA denied the charges and issued a detailed statement rebutting Col. Gundarev's charges. The agency said he was "free to travel to any country he chooses." Calling foreign government defectors "a continuing and valuable source of intelligence," the CIA said it fulfills all of its commitments and tries to help with the emotional strain experienced by the majority of defectors from closed societies.

The CIA also has boosted its budget for defector resettlement and assigned senior managers, linguists, psychiatrists and psychologists, although officials have stressed that the agency is in the intelligence business, not social service work.

Anatoly Bogaty, another KGB officer, threatened to return to the Soviet Union last year as a result of problems he attributes to the CIA.

Despite the recent negative publicity, not all defectors say they have been mistreated.

Oleg Agranyants, a former high-ranking Soviet Communist Party and Foreign Ministry official, said yesterday that he has made the transition to life in the United States without many problems.

"It has not been difficult for me to live in the West," Mr. Agranyants said in his first interview since defecting in 1986. "The one thing I learned is that once you're in America, you must work."

Mr. Agranyants said he worked secretly within the Soviet Communist Party since age 14 as an anti-communist. His defection to the United States was triggered by what he termed the "criminal" cover-up of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster by the Kremlin.

Since his defection, Mr. Agranyants has written a book in Russian on Soviet affairs that was published earlier this year in London, and he has two fictional works in progress.

Mr. Agranyants, who speaks Russian and French fluently and is proficient in English, said his main problem after defecting was learning to speak English. He also complained that U.S. immigration laws bar members of foreign communist parties from gaining U.S. citizenship for 10 years. He would like to gain citizenship sooner.

An Eastern European intelligence officer, who defected recently and asked not to be named, said yesterday that the CIA resettlement program has been very helpful in adjusting to life here.

"The process of adjustment was very, very difficult in the first months," said the defector, who left relatives behind and was sentenced to death in absentia.

The CIA provided the defector with a new identity, living expenses and a residence. Counselors were provided to help with learning small things, like opening bank accounts or purchasing insurance.

The defector said the CIA also provided people who spoke his language and helped him to overcome the loneliness of the defection process.

"Loneliness is the problem that is the most important thing to fight against," he said. Most defectors, he said, face a "crisis of depression."

His only complaint was not with the CIA, but with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which has been slow to upgrade his political refugee status to that of permanent resident alien.

The defector said he still is waiting for his "green card" and looks forward to the day when he will be an American.